“Teaching about food holds the power to transform not only what appears on children’s noon-time trays but also the very future of our planet and our societies.”¹ This quote illustrates the potential of food and nutrition education in schools. School-based interventions have been proven effective in shaping dietary behavior, provided they encompass three crucial domains from the World Health Organization Health Promoting Schools Framework.² These domains are: integrating food and nutrition education into the curriculum including experiences gardening and cooking, fostering changes in the school environment, and engaging with families and communities to reinforce healthy eating messages outside of school.³ Although this approach has been proven effective, these experiences are not yet widespread in schools, due to competing priorities.⁴

However, there is a new model. New York City (NYC) Public Schools is prioritizing positive school meals and food education.⁵ These changes will be introduced during the 2023–24 school year. NYC is the largest public school district in the United States with over 1 million students. About 72% of students are economically disadvantaged, and there is racial and ethnic diversity: Hispanic 41%, Black 24%, Asian 17%, and white 15%. Additionally, 21% are students with disabilities and 14% are English Language Learners.⁶

NYC’s proactive approach involves enhancing school meals and revolutionizing the educational experience around food. School meals will have more plant-based, scratch-cooked,⁷ and culturally inclusive recipes taking center stage. A Chef’s Council, led by Rachel Ray, developed new recipes, ensuring that students have access to healthier and more diverse food choices.⁸ Through a partnership with Wellness in the Schools⁹ the food service staff in NYC’s 1,200 school kitchens are receiving two months of professional development from a chef, with plans to reach all kitchens over the next two school years. Research has shown that children participating in school meal programs that are enhanced by training from chefs have increased fruit and vegetable consumption.¹⁰ The New York City Council has also dedicated $50 million to redesign school cafeterias according to the Healthy Eating Design Guidelines.¹¹ These redesigns have not only increased students’ attitudes toward school lunch, but have also increased school lunch participation from 21% to 41%.¹²

Expanding beyond nutritious meals, NYC is expanding and prioritizing food education as outlined by a roadmap, “Prioritizing Food Education in Our Public Schools: A Path to Developing a Healthy Next Generation”¹³ that recommends linking to educational standards in science¹⁴ English language literacy,¹⁵ and other subjects. Moreover, the city is expanding partnerships with organizations that provide food and nutrition education in schools with the goal of surpassing the 56% of schools that already had such partnerships in the 2016–17 school year.¹⁶ This roadmap’s ambitious goal is “[inte]grating food education across a child’s experience in and out of school, [and preparing] the next generation to achieve their full potential and contribute to a healthy, sustainable, and equitable New York City.”¹⁷

NYC aims to create an educational environment where school meals are not only nourishing but also valued and an integral part of the school day. This transformative approach holds the promise of reducing the burden of chronic diseases, boosting vitality, and fostering care for our planet.¹⁸

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REFERENCES


